Tahip Ağa—Dead or Alive?

One day Tahip Ağa attended a funeral. In the old days the coffin was not carried to the cemetery by a hearse but by friends of the dead person. Four men placed the coffin on their shoulders, one on each corner, and carried it from the home of the dead person to the cemetery. If the distance was very great, the four pallbearers would be relieved by four other pallbearers after a while. Sometimes they might have to change pallbearers two or three times.

Tahip Ağa was selected to be one of the pallbearers at the funeral I am telling you about. The people in the funeral procession decided to play a trick on him. When the time came to relieve the first four pallbearers, only three of them were

---

1An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

2The word coffin here probably has a different meaning
Story 1400

actually replaced. No one replaced Tahip Ağa. The pallbearers
were replaced a second and a third time, but no one replaced
Tahip Ağa. He carried one corner of the coffin for the entire
trip to the cemetery. By the time he reached the cemetery
Tahip Ağa was completely exhausted. Turning to the corpse in
the coffin, he said, "You scoundrel! Are you the dead one or
am I?"

from what it would have in another culture. Most Moslems are
not buried in coffins; the shrouded body is placed directly
into the earth. Behind the mosque of each village, however, is
a lidless wooden box in which the corpse is transported to the
cemetery; it is then returned to the mosque for the next
funeral. Most of these are not carried on shoulders. Most of
them have a handle on each corner. As a result of these
handles, the coffin is often referred to as "the four-armed
one."